“These conversations brought with them a wide range of complexities involved in listening: timing, silences, hesitations, misunderstandings, unexpected reactions, and moments of closeness”

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Quote on the cover page: Elettra Carnelli
Editor: Antoine Chessex / Layout: Gilles Lepore / Printed in Zürich, November 2025
Thanks to Sigrid Adorf for her support to this publication
éditions du désordre, 2025

Elettra Carnelli

Positions, Longings, and Learning in Listening

You probably wouldn't have guessed,
but I've sometimes imagined sharing
a long conversation with you.
I've imagined you listening attentively
when I speak to you, and vice versa.[1]

The desire to communicate and listen – so poignantly portrayed Han Kang's novel *Greek Lessons* through its unnamed protagonists, one gradually losing his sight, the other mysteriously becoming mute – deeply resonated with my own attempts to connect with the central figures of my current research: a collective of Communist architects from Milan born in the mid-1920s to early 1930s. By the time I began studying them, the founding members had already passed away. Over time, I found ways to connect with them indirectly, through their projects, writings, and the testimonies of their colleagues, friends, and family. Yet, a persistent and unfulfilled longing to speak and listen to them remained, echoing the evocative sense of yearning that permeates Kang's novel.

I often imagined engaging in a conversation with these architects, and more than asking questions, I imagined listening. I believed that listening was the key: through it, I would finally come to understand the challenges they faced, together with their thoughts, dreams, motivations, and hopes. I would grasp who they truly were, without filters or gaps.

To compensate for these impossible conversations, I turned to those who had known and worked with the main protagonists of my research. These conversations brought with them a wide range of complexities involved in listening: timing, silences, hesitations, misunderstandings, unexpected reactions, and moments of closeness. All of this was absent from my imagined dialogues, which existed only in an abstract, idealized realm. Through this process, I came to understand the transformative power of interviewing: how meaning is co-constructed through affect and resonance, mutually interwoven by interviewers and interviewees. Indeed, personal involvement in oral histories is not only inevitable but essential, as "the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives."[2] While I recognized how deeply interviews enriched my research, I also began to reflect on how listening to my interlocutors was, in turn, affecting me.

1
Han Kang, *Greek Lessons*, trans. Deborah Smith and Emily Yae Won (New York/London: Hogarth, 2023), 137.

2
Ann Oakley, "Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms," in *Doing Feminist Research*, ed. Helen Roberts (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 30–61, 58.

Personal note from January 24, 2024:
I should be careful when asking
personal questions for "research
reasons," as one never knows what
might surface, or what one might end
up sharing. Loss, disappointments,
joys, jealousies, love, regrets, intrigues.
Compelling, yes – but I should not
forget that all this material, which
forms the corpus of our academic
work, is ultimately made of sparks
of life – the lives of others.

Often, perhaps because of the bond formed during the conversation, or because the interviewees felt at ease, they shared deeply personal memories and reflections. I knew that oral history is not about uncovering facts, but about capturing "the emotional responses, the political views and the very subjectivity of human existence."[3] Still, I could not help but wonder: was I intruding? And how might this potential intrusion affect both me and my interlocutor? In the end, both sides are implicated in the conversation, our stories overlapping and intertwining.

3
Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2016), 22.

Personal note from March 20, 2024:
During today's interview, T.D.
bluntly admitted that her professional
career and political militancy came
to a halt when she became pregnant
with her two children. She described
that period as one of the darkest
in her life. In that moment, I felt a
weird succession of emotions: firstly,
empathy, for the sacrifices T.D. made;
and then, dismay: her children are
about my age, and I found myself
wondering how I would have felt if my
mother had said something like that.

As architectural historian Naomi Stead has noted, receiving a story is not without risks. It entails responsibilities and burdens inherent in the act of listening and situating an oral history within its broader social and personal context.[4] This includes receiving and engaging with the emotional dimension of a story. From a feminist perspective, emotions should not be dismissed – they are not opposed to knowledge production. In fact, "the investigator's ability to feel with the subject enables conversation and the re-telling of experiences and confidences that constitute the data and direct its interpretation, analysis, and writing up."[5]

4
Naomi Stead, "Architectural Affections," *Fabrications* 24, no. 2 (July 3, 2014): 156–77, https://doi.org/10.1080/10331867.2014.961230, 173.

5
Jennifer Harding and E. Deidre Pribram, "Losing Our Cool?," *Cultural Studies* 18, no. 6 (2004): 863–883, 878.

Personal note from January 21, 2023:
Today, I visited the studio of G.D.,
who passed away a year ago. His wife,
B., welcomed me. She seemed shaken,
and soon admitted that she hadn't
returned to the studio since his death.
I felt uncomfortable and hesitated to
ask my planned questions as I saw
the tears welling in her eyes. I was
ready to leave, but gradually, through
talking and listening, B. began to
open. She showed me around, brought
out folders and photographs. The
atmosphere shifted. As we chatted,
she told me she was glad I had come
– it gave her the chance to go through
the husband's work, something that
she hadn't felt ready to do before.
I no longer felt guilty.

These experiences and reflections compel me to ask, each time I prepare for an interview: as a listener and a researcher, what do I make of the stories shared with me? Where do I position myself in the process? While *feeling-with* and emotional embeddedness can be unsettling, they also create space for reflection and re-elaboration on experiences, desires, preconceptions, and perspectives, on both sides of the interview. In this way, knowledge is collaboratively constructed, moving beyond the binary of listener and speaker.

Through conducting interviews, I have learned not only to listen more attentively but also to embrace the relational and affective dimensions of listening. I no longer feel the need to erase or fill the gaps and discomfort. Instead, I am eager to weave stories together with my interlocutor.

Carla Peca

Relating through Listening: Anti-Gentrification Practices in “Kreis 5”

Which sounds have faded over time?
Which have survived several centuries?
What does my neighborhood sound like?
Which sounds feel like home – and which ones do I avoid?

During the first three years of my Ph.D., I lived in Kreis 5, a district in Zurich, and its sounds formed the sonic background of my writing. In summer, the distinct sound of making Kottu Roti from the Tamil restaurants fills the street, my room and eventually the food my belly. It is the rhythmic banging of a metal spatula against a metal pan. Since the early 19th century, when Italians came to build the railway, the district was a home to migrants and working-class people. In recent years, rents began to rise, and higher-income residents started to drive out the lower-income population. Gentrification becomes noticeable through construction noise – and leaves silence behind. The displacement of the local population is accompanied by the privatization of squares and parks, whose usage and sounds are strictly regulated. For how much longer will the banging sound of Kottu Roti be part of this neighborhood?[1]

Due to its proximity to the river and train station, the quarter “Kreis 5” has long been subject to rapid urban change, which has also shaped Zurich’s sonic landscape. Street names still recall the Swiss National Exhibition of 1883, marking the beginning of the district’s development. Many Italian restaurants and the square “Piazza Cella” – named after Ermina Cella, who ran the restaurant “Cooperativo”– remember the second wave of Italian migrants, who settled here when factories and workers’ housing emerged in the late nineteenth century. In the mid-twentieth century, as factories moved to the city’s outskirts, production noise gave way to nightlife.
As rents rose, the domestic sounds of workers faded as well. In the 1980s, the youth movement occupied abandoned buildings and founded Zurich’s first squat. Later, police sirens became emblematic, as the district gained international notoriety for its open drug scene.

Another place in “Kreis 5” I frequented while writing my thesis was the Feminist Streikhaus at Sihlquai. I started to offer donation-based Shiatsu sessions here: to keep me sane and connected to my body, while reading and writing–but also to give back to the feminist movement, since writing a doctoral thesis requires a certain amount of retreat. Even though it was located just next to the river, its sound was covered by the passing cars. Instead, the birds in the garden became much louder than their siblings in the countryside, as they had to compete with the noise of cars. The walls of Streikhaus are very thin and the street noise would also fill “Körperraum”, where I was giving the Shiatsu-Sessions. Occasionally I would play fake ocean-sounds to cover the cars. Many later told me that it felt like being on holiday; to lay on a beach next to a busy street.

Streikhaus has its origins in the Feminist Movement from 2019, when they organized the big feminist Streik on June 14th. As is customary here in Zurich, spaces are given for a limited time as interim usage, so they won’t be occupied. The same is true for the former community center at Sihlquai, which was given to the feminist movement until 2025. The contract was prolonged, but its future is uncertain. In the city’s tradition of radically transforming this district, they are planning to build a school district called “Bildungsmeile”. The Feminist Streikhaus and its garden will have to go, along with the building that is accommodating the Autonome Schule, a self-organized school offering language courses for free, as well as Photobastei, an uncommercial art space for photography. The former industrial buildings from the early 20th century, such as the building of Aktiengesellschaft Auer & Co. and the headquarters of the West Indian Banana Centrale, are allowed to remain standing thanks to their heritage status. The former, with its lettering, is at least a reminder of Switzerland’s colonial past, which is often swept under the carpet.
The latter houses a café that sells overpriced coffee and matcha in a start-up vibe.

Together with Vicky and Etienne, both also active at Streikhaus, we held a Listening Walk through “Kreis 5” and created a sound and movement improvisation format called “Embodied Orchestra Kreis 5” together with Stadtorchester. It was inspired by Ultra-red and their practice of “militant sound investigations”, Deep Listening Scores from Pauline Oliveiros and the practice of the “derive” by the situationists. I opened the listening walk with an introduction on the sonic memory of Zurich, which sparked a collective imagination of the area’s

[1] Just one month after writing this article, Maneez received notice that they are being evicted because the building will be undergoing complete renovation. See also Bartal, Yann: “Leerkündigungen im Kreis 5: Zürichs ‘Little Sri Lanka’ unter Druck”, Tsüri.ch, 15.07.2025.

acoustic past. It was then followed by listening walks through the quarter. The participants were invited to follow different sounds and record them. With the silent walks, we tried to offer an alternative way of engaging with the neighborhood, prompting reflection on questions such as: Which sounds remain today? Which have faded over time? What does my neighborhood sound like? Which sounds feel like home – and which ones do I avoid? For "Embodied Orchestra Kreis 5" we went a step further and tried to strengthen the collective experience. Etienne, who is also engaged with WIM (Werkstatt für improvisierte Musik) introduced us to Stadtorchester. The musicians already had an established practice of engaging with Gentrification through sound improvisation. After a silent listening walk around the event venue, the Stadtorchester started to play. The participants were invited using Scores to participate with movement. The aim was to explore whether listening and moving to the sounds of "Kreis 5" could strengthen residents' connection to their neighborhood and increase resistance to top-down change. Its effect cannot be determined at this moment and remains to be seen. But participants did share with me that they were able to perceive their neighborhood differently: While usually, they would walk through the streets with headphones on or their bodies would be tense under the daily stress, moving slowly and in silence, they were able to connect to their neighborhood, to its sounds, their bodies were able to relax and for some of them, for the first time "Kreis 5" really felt like home.

Listening Score by
Vicky Baderna &
Carla Peca

Make yourself comfortable with a straight spine
You can be standing or seated
Close your eyes
Take a few deep inhales
Try to listen to the sound that is furthest away from you
Try to listen to a sound in this room
Try to listen to the sound of your breath
Try to listen to a sound of your body
Move in and out with your perception
Take as many rounds as you wish
Open your eyes
Start to follow the sounds around you and let them guide you through your neighborhood
Stay with interesting sounds for a while until the next sound catches your attention
Record them if you like

Hanna G. Diedrichs genannt Thormann

A bunch of questions and some answers

...for _every_ re/searcher
who likes to
explore or re/think and _gently_ and/or _radically_ re/shape
their normalized (academic) identity_ies
and (research) practice_s
in an embodied and perhaps play- and _joyful_and/or_
painful_ way,
inspired by the concept of listening
as a reflective (and calming? complicating? grounding?)
practice.
The following exercises as _friendly_ questions and/or
critical reminders
form an incomplete list in a(n) _randomly curated_ order.
Think about all of them or choose (n)one.

What is the soundtrack of my re/searching life, audio wise in playlist or surrounding soundscape(s) and/or metaphorically?

What if I do _this_ more slowly? What if I do it faster?

What does it mean for me to be in contact with my re/searching body? To listen to my (meat) body whilst doing research?

What signals does my body give me when it's time to slow down, to take a break, to adjust my workload or goals for the time being?

How can I imagine listening to my body as a habit or as a process?

What are my speculations, is my practical experience or knowledge in the field of listening to ones own body in general, and in the context of practicing research?

Where do I feel ease or comfort in my body _right now_? And, how can I expand this sensation?

Do I know what helps me feel well or at ease with my body and mind during/in my research practice? If yes, what is that and how can I get more of it?

What are my _three to five_ core values in academia and re/searching? Are they my own? Do they still suit me, or do I want to change anything about them?

What alternative or emerging values (e.g., slowness, collaboration, care, embodied knowledge) resonate with my own way of doing research?

What sorts of things do I feel have an impact on my overall experience of a situation, e.g., in terms of sensory stimuli, time, social interaction, architectural setting, values, implicit or explicit expectations, and others? How, where and when is my body signalling this?

What subtle pleasures – like warmth, breath, or a stretch – am I noticing bodily in this moment? What sensations, images, or thoughts come up when I concentrate on them?

When was the last time I consciously slowed down, took a pause, and checked in with myself? When did I take a deep breath and asked, "How am I feeling, and what do I need right now?" and then did listen to the feelings I noticed in my meat body, observed my emotions, let my mind wander, and harkened to the sensations, images, or thoughts that might have come up, then reflected on these, and adjusted where I needed to? Have I ever done this in an academic context? And what would be the most bizarre research situation or university setting for me (or maybe anyone) to do this?

Are there academic tasks that consistently cause stress or discomfort in my body? Practices that leave me struggling to dis_connect or restless at night?

In which academic environments or situations do I find myself overworking or pushing beyond my limits? Do I know my limits and boundaries? Are they the same all the time?

What practices or rhythms support a sense of flow and ease for me in researching or writing? And, if I know flow state: How do I physically and mentally experience it? Am I able to meet my basic needs (e.g. hydrate, eat, toilet, pause…) while in this state?

How does my body respond when I encounter dominant academic values (e.g., productivity, competition, detachment…)? What sensations arise? What do I associate with these terms?

Which rituals, breaks, or habits help me unwind after an intense day of re/searching or other academic stuff? If there aren't any, can I come up with a (fancy or not) personal ritual to help with this?

Which implicit norms, perceived standards or supposedly models about being a _good_ re/searcher or PhD candidate have I internalized, and how do they affect my well-being?

How does listening to my re/searching body correlate (or not) with the practice of embodied research for me?

Are there research practices and academic activities or routines that cause discomfort or unease in my body? Which ones? Where and how can I feel and describe these in my body?

Considering my body as an archive of knowledge beyond texts and citations, what kinds of wisdom, resistance, and resilience would it reveal? How does it feel to listen to these traces and sensations?

What work routines or rituals help me transition into a restful state at the end of the (working) day?

Are there physical, mental, psychological, or emotional obstacles or barriers for me in academia, especially during my PhD journey?

How can I engage differently with my research topic or material by applying the concept of listening?

Which work patterns, activities, or situations contribute to feelings of stagnation, heaviness, or exhaustion in my re/searching life?

What academic stereotypes can I think of? Which ones influence my body- or self-perception? How? And do they serve or limit me?

What would my ideal experience of navigating life with academia look like when it comes to paying attention to and caring for my body, mind, emotions, and overall well-being while working in research or pursuing a PhD?

What might be consequences of really listening to my re/searching body and self within common academic settings and structures? Am I okay with this? Who else is or might be?

What movement(s), posture, or stillness brings me a sense of pleasure or release in _this exact moment_?

Are there standards, habits, or pressures that push my body and mind beyond a sustainable level of productivity?

What kind of academic or research practice would make my body feel truly nourished and at home?

How does my body 'remember' academic spaces (e.g., conference rooms, libraries, classrooms), and what emotions or sensations arise from these memories?

What traces and embodied experiences – e.g., of learning, exclusion, recognition, or struggle – are stored in my body, shaping how I navigate academia?

Are there specific research or writing practices that leave me feeling accomplished rather than depleted?

Considering recent experiences, what should or could be written down in my personal Stage Rider or Tech Rider? Would a document like that outlining my personal (academic) needs – e.g. interaction or framework obligations, space and gear requirements, setting preferences, and special requests – help me when selecting and planning live performances? Also, how do I feel about sharing such a personal document with others to facilitate more enjoyable, and less stressful academic events and collaborations for myself and others, when I am going on tour outside the desk? What if I ask the people I work with for their stage rider?

If I had the chance to reimagine my academic path or PhD journey as a pleasurable, joyful, and fulfilling experience, what could it look like? What would shift in my daily rhythms or priorities? What small changes might help to create that sense of happiness and satisfaction?

How does it feel to experiment (theoretically or in practice) with expressing bodily needs, sensations, feelings, or emotions as completely normal in professional settings? How might I think others would experience this? Can I ask them?

What if I consider it okay for myself_everyone to feel, want, and do differently from my colleagues_norms in academic settings? Or…

Where, when, and how would I like to give the sounds, signals, and needs of my re/searching body more space during _this day_?

Which academic tasks or routines leave me feeling physically and/or mentally drained?

Do I know which of the people I collaborate or work with would find it commonplace or at least acceptable to talk about listening to my re/searching body, academic well-being in general, or embodied research practices?

What are my stress factors? What are my personal vulnerabilities? And those of my colleagues? Also, who's missing because of such?

How does my body communicate its needs for e.g. rest, joy, or curiosity? And how does it communicate its rising stress level or increasing discomfort?

Which research activities, practices, and work habits bring me joy? Which ones help me feel energized and focused? How does this feel bodily?

How do certain academic activities, research practices, or ways of working contribute to my overall sense of well-being?

How can I align my (academic) journey with values that honour both my intellectual curiosity as well as my _bodily_ sensations and needs as a cyborg or human?

If I imagined an academic culture where amongst other things (various) bodies, emotions, and resting were fully acknowledged, how would it look and feel like? What small actions can I take toward this?

How do I imagine it feels to bring my favourite cushion or blanket to academic places and spaces? How does it really feel? And what would I even do with it in those environments?

Which academic routines help me start the day feeling grounded and ready to engage with my research?

How could I apply the method of pleasure mapping to my re/searching situation and university contexts? Or: What would my Academic Pleasure Map look like?

Which academic tasks or commitments feel manageable and allow me to stop before feeling overwhelmed or burning out?

What's my favourite re/searching place? …and, what's my academic safe space?

What does it take for me to become or stay sustainably in contact with my re/searching body whilst practicing my research? What does it take to keep working on this?

How does it feel to stop adding to this list of questions, to stop structuring and editing it? Where in my body can I sense (dis)comfort, and what quality is it of? Is it staying, or does it come along with me when I remove myself from the desk?

[…]

The previous questions were
gathered, shared, formulated, and (re)searched
during the preparation, event, and follow-up
of my multi-dimensional workshop contribution
"Listening to our PhDing Bodies."
In conclusion, everyone was invited to write down
an observation and an intention
to be anonymously redistributed and read aloud.
These notes, which I may share here as reproductions,
are valuable physical reminders for me
of two days of theoretical and embodied yet intangible experiences
in softening, expanding, and shifting
our thinkable, behavioural and spatial academic formation,
and making kin.

je mehr ich lerne mir selbst und/oder meinen Körper zuzuhören, desto wichtiger und desto schwieriger erscheint mir die Aufgabe, mit dem Gehörten respektvoll umzugehen.

Ich will in meinen nächsten Texten das Zuhören (meiner Quellen / Umgebungsgeräusche) beschreiben ... und schauen, was

Zusammen lesen; eigenmessy lesen - Spielerisch mit Texten in Kontakt treten als Methode.

>>> conscious grounding when going into intense abstract thinking processes → via (slow) breath and touch, directing physical markers into points of connection.

Reading aloud with other people in a resonant space with abstract sound.

laut lesen mit anderen menschen

Ich möchte in Zukunft mehr auf meinen Körper hören. Die Selbstcheck in Übung hat mir sehr geholfen.

Attention, Relational listening, Collective Sharing and being together

/CH MÖCHTE MEHR ZEIT NEHMEN, BÜCHERN ZU LAUSCHEN & MIT IHNEN ZUSAMMEN ZU ARBEITEN

~~Bevor~~ Codes zu verstehen/lernen/anzuwenden, die dazu dienen sich in akademischen Räumen zu bewegen ist sowohl eine körperliche wie geistige Anpassungsleistung. Mehr mal so.

ALLES WAS ICH THE BRINGT RESONANZEN (ECHOS, RE-AKTIONEN, EMOTIONEN, BEWEGUNGEN). DIE DÜRFEN PASSIVE ERFAHRUNG BLEIBEN & FORDERN KEINE AKTIVEN REPRÄSENTATIONEN

Ich darf mich emotional und körperlich ~~Entgegnet~~ fühlen an in akademischen Settings → ~~oder~~ unaufgeregt + mich langsam fühlen als neutral / positiv

following intuition for finding literature/ reading theory from an entry point of intuition

Ich fand es schön kostenlos, aber auch schwierig an andere Dozenten heranzukommen. Dozenten kamen mit unterschiedlichen Genre, Material, Fragestellung, Interessen, Geographien / Zeitlichkeiten an der Annäherung an diese viele ~~Text~~ Textbereiche heran. Dies ist auch ein Zukunftsziel, ich würde mich gerne weiter in Austausch setzen.

Ich möchte weiter versuchen beziehungsweise lernen ~~die~~ die Komplexität, die sich durch Öffnung zeigt, weniger als zielhafte Überforderung, sondern mehr mit ganz viel Neugier wahrzunehmen.

limits and potentials of Listening (filter and imagination)

(1)

Poetry is the part that no one sees clip the flower burn the brush watch rain stream

down the moon-viewing window six drops fold together then glimmer burn

a stick of Autumn Leaves crack the screen door write longer have beams shooting out and over the blessed bountiful body[a]

Can you hear the sound of life in the roar- ing of the creek

in the blowing of the wind That is all I want to say that is all[b]

the empty spaces that are conjured to be (ful)filled

between two abstract and dimensionless points —

In emplotted time and space, the shortest distance

mines, cabins, railways, roads and tourism/

recreation, without Saami consent. What is new,

Piece by piece, the land is fragmented by dams,

The dis- ordered sounds that we refer to as cacophony will always be cast as

‹extra- musical› […] precisely because we hear

something in them that

reminds us that our desire for

harmony is arbitrary and in another world harmony would sound incomp- re-

hensible. Listening to cacophony and noise tells us that there is a wild be-

yond to the structu-

res we inhabit and that inhabit us.[c]

(2)

Bring the out- side in… the grey conti- nuous tangle of moss posing as a man- dala bur- ning the sudden white tiny cracks in be- tween out- side[a]

as world, or worlds,

or

parts of worlds — is a straight

and dimensionless line.[d]

It is

(the heat and

shape of

the mountain)[a]

is only

nothing but

the colour.

green colonialism[e]

[a]Cedar Sigo: »November 19, 2016 (for Joanne Kyger)«, in *All This Time* (Wave Books, 2021, 10ff.)
[b]Nils-Aslak Valkeapää: untitled poem, in *Trekways of the Wind* (DAT, 1994, 119)
[c]Jack Halberstam: »The Wild Beyond: With and For the Undercommons«, in *The Undercommons* (Minor Compositions, 2013, 7)
[d]Stefano Harney & Fred Moten: *All Incomplete* (Minor Compositions, 2021, 17)
[e]Eva Maria Fjellheim: »Honourable Court«, in *Let the River Flow* (OCA/Valiz, 2020, 123)
[inbetween]Raven Chacon: *A Worm's Eye View from a Bird's Beak* (Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum Tromsø/Romssa, 16.03.–01.09.2024)

爱 letter to the never ending wave, please catch me if you can…

by kay zhang

the little coil of a seashell
washed-up algae
resting for days
on the sandy beach

footsteps,
bare feet,
trembling stones
as waves crash,
return to shore

every tide comes to an end
withdraws
a new breath

jellies float
drift away

dive deep
one breath

swept down
play-fighting with air

slipping into the blue
down into the deep sea

listen to each wave
that shows up,
for its last—after traveling
so many tides.

the waves arrive for its last pull

爱,
温,
温柔.

tears
the candle continues to burn,
shivering in its oils.

light spills its magic,
a continuous flame.

a softness that dampens
breath_ness begins
swallows it whole

aside the bell

future fortune tellers of whispers
cinders of incense ashes
loops
loops
loops
what are sonic rituals that lie to be ancestral?
the twisted tongues of shrines
let the rings of fire drop like

let the rings of fire drop like

the mountain tops
kiss
baoboa floats up

because they are immiscible

cradles

up beneath the skin

the waterfalls are gushing

through the gills

whiplash lizards

whizzle their way
through the chasm
tongues tied and intertwined

eyes wide open 顺其自然

Ed Williams/Johannes Keller

Decomposition Study

This is a reflection on an experimental instrument from the 16th century called the Arciorgano (http://www.projektstudio31.com).

Taking a new, experimental piece of music made for this instrument as a practical example of its potential in new music, we combine texts written at the time by its inventor Nicola Vicentino with today's critical theory, and so attempt to illustrate the far-reaching implications of Vicentino's theory not only in the field of music but also in queer theory, eco- and transfeminism, as a tool for probing phenomenological norms established by the very culture it grew from and tried to change, namely, European ontologies of rigid, hierarchical classifications.

We invite the reader to listen to the recording of Decomposition Study *while reading the following pages (a web link to the recording is provided on the next page)*

Decomposition Study
by Ed Williams

for Arciorgano and six musicians (c. 45')
https://insub.bandcamp.com/album/decomposition-study

A Conversation with Nicola Vicentino (1511-1576)

imagined by Johannes Keller,
all quotes are taken from Nicola Vicentino,
L'antica musica ridotta alla moderna prattica, Rome 1555

J: Can you play a major chord and a minor chord on the Arciorgano for me?

N: Yes of course. But I also have a chord that is in between, that takes after the major but is not major, and takes after the minor but is not minor [*che participerà della maggiore & non farà maggiore, & participerà della minore & non farà minore,* V.8], and many more.

A Compost Pile of Queer Theory

selected by Ed Williams,
featuring quotes taken from
J. Halberstam, *Trans**, Oakland 2018,
E. Bigé, *Mouvementements*, Paris 2023,
and S. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, Durham 2006

Both the musical language and the instrument in *Decomposition Study* date from the era of human invention just preceding the Industrial Revolution: the music is a 2-part canon following the rules of *contrapunto alla mente*, a 16th century practice of vocal improvisation, while the organ (an "Arciorgano") was built according to the designs of the theorist and composer Nicola Vicentino around 1555. Using art forms from pre-fossil-fuel times, this piece also employs modern technology (a 6-face "Cube" speaker and condenser microphones) and illustrates a kind of grieving process for traditional European culture through the analogy of regenerative, organic decay that happens in compost piles.

Capable of wandering outside of major and minor keys, there is an arguably non-binary aspect to the "enharmonic" experiments of Vicentino that the Arciorgano is designed for, resulting in a phenomenological shift in conditioned Western ears regarding what is diatonic, chromatic, in tune, dissonant – in a word, what is "right" and "wrong". Paul B. Preciado's likening the "Copernican revolution" to today's expression of multiple gender identities might be extended to Vicentino's enharmonic music as a system that questions tonal centers.

"How can we understand these dualisms? How can we learn to refuse them? […] Or, more precisely, how do we learn to make them coexist and co-regulate each other […]?", *Mouvementements*, p. 135.

"My use of the asterisk [in the term *trans**] […] embraces the nonspecificity of the term 'trans' and uses it to open the term up to a shifting set of conditions and possibilities." *Trans**, p. 52.

In *contrapunto alla mente*, groups of singers improvise counterpoint with reference to one another, applying strict rules to ensure not only steady consonance but also how to deliberately introduce dissonance in order to create cadences. In *Decomposition Study*, the two organists pass their notes from one to another within an unequal division of the octave in 36 parts, the microtonal tuning system producing what the eco-feminist philosopher Donna Haraway might call "companionable friction" (Haraway, Donna, *Staying with the Trouble*, Durham 2016).

J: So you like to play out of tune?

N: Above all things, a composer needs to look for variety which must never lack in their compositions, by varying the size of melodic and harmonic intervals [*Et ſopra ogni coſa il Compoſitore dè auertire alla uarietà, che mai non manchi nelle ſue compoſitioni, & sè uarierà i gradi, & le conſonanze*, II.7]. It's the composer's duty to give a soul to the words, and to illustrate their emotions with sound. This is the reason why […] any bad step and any ugly harmony can be used, as long as it follows the impact of the lyrics. Therefore any kind of interval should be considered to express the full range of emotions [*il Compoſitore […] ſarà ſolamẽte obligato à dar'l'anima, à quelle parole, & con l'Armonia di moſtrare le ſue paſſioni, […] & da qui ſi cauerà la ragione, che ogni mal grado, con cattiua conſonanza, ſopra le parole ſi potrà uſare, ſecondo i loro effetti, adunque ſopra tali parole ſi potrà comporre ogni ſorte de gradi, & di armonia*, III.15]. If you exclusively use the conventional intervals, you'll find a great sourness in such music [*ſi ſentirà in queſta Muſica una aſprezza grande*, III.26].

In her *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed recounts how one day, coming home with her wife, her neighbor asks her, "Is that your sister, or your husband?". The philosopher is led to conclude, "It is the ordinary work of perception that straightens the queer effect […] such desire is often seen as inauthentic",
Queer Phenomenology, p. 95.

Jack Halberstam on a discussion around non-binary pronouns: "What struck Levy, the journalist, as inelegant and ungrammatical strikes Myles as nonnormative and full of possibility […] genders only emerge in relation to other bodies and within multiply oriented and complex populations",
*Trans**, p. 11.

The four other musicians must do various things to the organ while the organists are playing, including manually maintaining and altering airflow to the instrument. They are called "enzymes" as they act similarly to cellular enzymes in decaying organisms that initiate the breakdown of tissues in the decompositional process known as *autolysis*, turning the instrument into a steaming compost pile sprouting colorful new life out of both the organ's own pipes and the Cube's speakers. It is an invitation to break open the circularity of chronos time and plunge into the thick, dilated "now" of kairos; to unfold the crumpled music paper of space-time-matter and explore the interconnected mesh of focal points that are revealed.

J: But how do you decide if an interval is right or wrong?

N: Music has always been practiced by humans naturally. And it is done in many different ways, as one can see and hear, since in all the nations of the world, each nation has its own prosody and different sizes of steps in their scales. And when they sing together, they naturally find consonance in accordance with their regions, languages and nations. Even if sung well, such consonance disagrees with the intervals of the music approved by science, although such dissonant intervals seem to be consonant to them. [*la Muſica è ſtata ſempre naturalmente da gl'huomini pratticata, & per uarij modi eſercitata, come ſi uede, & ode, che in tutte le nationi del mondo, ogni natione ha gli ſuoi accenti, & gradi di uoci differenti, e quando inſi eme cantano, ritrouano naturalmente qualche accordo di conſonanze ſecondo loro paeſi , lingue, & nationi, & ſe bene cantando diſcordano dalle proportioni della prattica approuata della ſcientia, nondimeno tali diſcordanze à loro paiono conſonanze*, I.1]

"In some contexts, gender-ambiguous bodies have been swept into colonial logics of difference, even though they might have been understood differently prior to conquest."
*Trans**, p. 27.

"The East is associated with women, sexuality and the erotic, with what is 'behind' and 'below' the West, as well as what is on 'the other side' […] it acquires its direction only by taking a certain point of view as given."
Queer Phenomenology, p. 14.

"Indeed, perspective is only one of the events marking the 16th century, during which modern anatomy and artificial perspective were invented, but also cartography and watchmaking."
Mouvementements, p. 42.

J: Did you build your Arciorgano to examine and measure unconventional intervals because science doesn't approve them?

N: Everyone can put their very own way of singing into music with the tuning system of our instrument. With the conventional system, one cannot notate a French song, nor a German, Spanish, Hungarian, Turkish or Hebrew one, nor of other nations, because the intervals of all the nations of the world, according to their native pronunciation, do not use only the steps of a tone and semitone, but also diesis, accidental semitones and tones, and enharmonic leaps. Our tuning system accommodates all the nations of the world. [*tutti potranno porre in muſica il ſuo modo di cantare con i gradi della diuiſione del noſtro ſtromento, che con la muſica che hora s'uſa, non ſi può ſcriuere alcuna canzone Franzeſe, ne Tedeſca, ne ſpagnuola, ne Vngara, ne Turca, ne Hebrea, ne d'altre nationi, perche i gradi & ſalti di tutte le nationi del mondo, ſecondo la ſua pronuntia materna, non procedeno ſolamente per gradi di tono, e di ſemitoni naturali, et accidentali, ma per Dieſis, e ſemitoni, e toni, e per ſalti Enarmonici; ſi che cō queſta noſtra diui ione hauremo accommodato tutte le nationi del mondo*, IV.29].

"My spontaneous ontology […] is made of objects I can manipulate easily […] an ontology made of dry objects (not too wet […] not too fluid, quite consistent […]) […] Let's imagine we mightbring into existence other realities than those of dry substances stabilized by our indo-european grammars."
Mouvementements, p. 35.

Through the concept of *compost* present in the eco-feminist writings of Donna Haraway, Emma Bigé, and others, we can consider musical material as organic matter discarded onto a compost heap where enzymes, bacteria and other bioactivators break it down and create rich, sonic soil. The "decomposition" enacted by the enzyme-performers can be seen as a life process as well as a death process; the cell is also akin to a seed which is sown in the soil of the performers' collective listening state to then break open and sprout forth fresh green shoots of musical gestures.

J: What are these unconventional intervals you mentioned, "accidental semitones and tones", "diesis" and "enharmonic leaps"?

N: These are melodic intervals that are the result of a transmutation of the diatonic genus. My music uses three genera, the diatonic, the chromatic and the enharmonic. The same scale can be manifested in each genus. The diatonic genus contains the familiar steps we use for normal music. The sizes of those steps can be transmutated to become a manifestation of the chromatic genus, or the enharmonic genus.

Perhaps Halberstam's asterisk (*) can be employed here to represent the transmutation of genera as a way of going beyond the modern habit of "exhaustive classification" (p. 7): "The fragmentation, segmentation, multiplicity of the category trans* can only emerge within an optic that recognizes trans* as a capacious and fluid category rather than a diagnosis […] not simply as trans bodies that provide an image of the nonnormative against which normative bodies can be discerned, but as bodies that are fragmentary and internally contradictory […] bodies that sound different than they look, bodies that represent palimpsestic relations to identity […]"
*Trans**, p. 88.

J: In order to perform your music, one has simply to learn these unconventional intervals?

N: Basically yes. But there is more to it:
All intervals of the three genera come in different shades. And like that, by enlarging and diminishing, one can grasp all steps and leaps that occur in our musical practice, with its close and closest intervals [*& così ciaſcuno, aggiugnendo & minuendo, s'accommoderà alla cognitione de tutti i gradi & ſalti, che occorrerà nella noſra prattica Muſicale, […] con i ſuoi ſalti propinqui & propinquiſſimi*, I.41]. An interval is therefore not a certainty, but exists within a spectrum of uncertainty.

"[I]t requires a reorientation of one's body such that other objects, those that are not reachable on the vertical and horizontal lines of straight culture, can be reached."
Queer Phenomenology, p. 100.

"Transgenderism […] has never been simply a new identity among many others competing for space under the rainbow umbrella. Rather, it constitutes radically new knowledge about the experience of being in a body and can be the basis for very different ways of seeing the world."
*Trans**, p. 87.

"The multi-pointed asterisk is fingery; it both points and touches." Hayward, Eva and Weinstein, Jami, "Introduction: Tranimalities in the Age of Trans* Life", in: *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, II, 2 (2015), pp. 195-208.

Decomposition Study is a way of asking what similarities can be found between these moments of dissonance and resolution and the moments of "not-knowing together" that emerge during instances of disorientation when we become dislodged from what is familiar to us; something that can easily be recreated – intentionally or not – in spontaneous group improvisation, but also when shifting in and out of different genera. *Decomposition Study* is decomposed as it is played, recomposed as it is heard.

Please note that one can't teach all that happens in a piece of music, because the coincidences that occur when putting together a piece teach certain things that the student wouldn't have imagined or foreseen otherwise [*si dè auuertire che non si può ſegnare il tutto che occorre nelle compoſitioni, perche gl'accidenti nel cſporre inſegnano certe coſe, che lo Studente non ha pēſato, ne penſa.*, IV.29].

"Rather than ordering, organizing, and structuring the environment in order to find what suits us […] we need to be on the look-out, following the lines of force and the movements of beings that are foreign to us."
Mouvementements, p. 93.

"This case of discomfort is enabled by a sense of wonder […]"
Queer Phenomenology, p. 82.